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ABSTRACT

This brief describes new requirements for vocational education program improvement and evaluation mandated by the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990. Recommendations to enhance the impact of program improvement and evaluation activities are included. The first two sections discuss developing new state accountability systems and improving programs through annual evaluation, local program improvement plans, and joint program improvement plans. The third section addresses ensuring increased achievement for special populations through the following methods: encouraging efforts to serve special populations; using more than the minimum number of measures; evaluating access, learning, and labor market outcomes; selecting measures that assess change over time; and selecting measures that allow for fair comparisons. A discussion of supplementary services necessary to program improvement and eight references complete the document. (KC)

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TASPP BRIEF

Technical Assistance for Special Populations Program

Volume 3 Number 3

THE 1990 PERKINS: EVALUATING AND IMPROVING PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

by Maureen Coyle-Williams and Carolyn Maddy-Bernstein

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Educational reform activities during the 1990s are focusing not only on increasing the quality of education, but also on making programs more accountable for results. America 2000, President Bush's plan for achieving the National Education Goals, calls for an accountability package that will encourage parents, teachers, schools, and communities to "measure results, compare results and insist on change when the results aren't good enough" (U.S. Department of Education, 1991a, p. 21). Mandates within the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act of 1990 place vocational education at the forefront of the movement to increase educational program accountability. If successful, the law will improve academic and occupational outcomes for the growing number of Americans facing unemployment, underemployment, low wages, and poverty.

Congress expects the 1990 Perkins Act to generate significant improvements for individuals who are members of special populations. Toward this end, vocational educators have been called upon to redouble efforts to serve special populations and to focus upon academic as well as occupational achievement. In order to monitor progress toward these objectives, the 1990 Perkins legislation mandates the establishment of statewide accountability systems. When implemented, these systems will enable local vocational education programs to document improved outcomes.

Over the next three years, local programs will use measures and standards of performance to evaluate progress in increasing student achievement, set goals for necessary improvements, and implement plans to bring their programs up to state defined standards. Widespread improvements in vocational programs will be facilitated by the development of quality systems of accountability in each state. Careful attention must be paid to documenting increased achievement among low-achieving students and ensuring that state systems encourage increased access to quality vocational programs for individuals who are members of special populations. A firm commitment to improving outcomes for all students, including those who are members of special populations, is critical. This *BRIEF* describes new requirements for program improvement and evaluation in the 1990 Perkins. Recommendations to enhance the impact of program improvement and evaluation activities are included.

Developing New State Accountability Systems

Each state receiving Perkins funds must establish an accountability system by the fall of 1992. These systems are to be used to evaluate student, program, and institution outcomes at the local level. Learning, both academic and occupational, as well as labor market and accessibility outcomes are to be examined through the system of measures and standards developed by each state.

While the law mandates multiple objectives for program improvement, requirements for statewide accountability systems are minimal. Only two measures are required—one measure of learning and competency gains (including academic skills learning) and one of the following: (a) competency, (b) job or work skill attainment, (c) school retention, or (d) placement.

Local programs may modify state measures and standards to suit local economic, geographic, or demographic factors and/or the characteristics of the populations to be served. However, *local modifications must conform to the assessment criteria in the state plan.* (Section 115 (a)).

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WHAT ARE PERFORMANCE MEASURES AND STANDARDS?

(Hoachlander, 1990)

Performance measure: The type of outcome considered appropriate for monitoring.

Performance standard: The level of performance that individual students, programs, or institutions are expected to achieve.

Performance measures and standards may be defined for students, courses, programs, institutions, districts, regions, or states.

Standards may be established to assess performance at a single point in time (benchmark criteria) and to assess performance over time (value added or longitudinal measures). *Value added or longitudinal standards* require assessing performance at different points in time to determine the amount of learning that has occurred during the period.

WAYS TO ASSESS GROWTH/PROGRESS

(Hoachlander, 1990)

Learning

Course completion rates
High school graduation rates
Rates of completing degrees or certificates
Patterns of course taking—for example,
the percentage of students pursuing a planned sequence of vocational and academic courses as evidenced by student transcripts
Student achievement on competency-based tests
Program completion rates
Attendance rates
Student achievement on standardized tests

Labor Market

Time needed to find and secure employment
Placement rates
In a job related to training
In any job
In further education or training
In the military or other service
(e.g., the Peace Corps)
Entry level wage
Quarterly earnings
Time employed in first job
Rate at which quarterly earnings increase
Employer and employee satisfaction

Access/Equity

The percentage of male and female students and students with special needs *enrolled* in a specific vocational education program compared to the percentage of male and female students and students with special needs in the school population.

The percentage of students with special needs *completing* selected vocational education programs compared to the percentage of students with special needs in the school population.

The percentage of students with special needs *entering jobs* related to training compared to the percentage of students without special needs entering jobs related to training.

1990 PERKINS REQUIREMENTS FOR STATEWIDE SYSTEMS OF CORE STANDARDS AND MEASURES OF PERFORMANCE FOR SECONDARY AND POSTSECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

(Section 115 (b))

Systems of performance standards and measures must include:

measures of learning and competency gains, including student progress in basic and more advanced academic skills;

measures for one or more of the following:

competency attainment,
job or work skill attainment or enhancement,
school retention or completion,
placement into additional training, education, military service, or employment;

incentives or adjustments that:

encourage services to special populations, and
are developed for each student and are consistent with individualized education plans (where appropriate); and

procedures for using existing resources and methods developed in other federal programs (e.g., JTPA programs).

Improving Programs

Annual Evaluation

Beginning with the 1992-93 school year, local secondary school systems and postsecondary institutions receiving Perkins funds must evaluate the effectiveness of all vocational-technical programs annually. During the evaluation, local programs will review and evaluate their progress as determined by statewide measures and standards of performance (or approved modifications). *Additionally, program progress in providing vocational students with strong experience in and understanding of all aspects of the industry they are preparing to enter must be evaluated* (Section 117 (a)). Particular attention is to be paid to the status of individuals who are members of special populations.

Program reviews are to be conducted with the full and informed participation of representatives of individuals who are members of special populations to:

- identify and adopt strategies to overcome any barriers which are resulting in lower rates of access to vocational education programs or success in such programs for individuals who are members of special populations; and
- evaluate the progress of individuals who are members of special populations in vocational programs assisted under this act (Section 117 (a)).

The scope of local evaluation has been a topic of much debate. To date, it appears that the U.S. Department of Education will require that statewide systems of core performance measures and standards be used to evaluate all vocational education programs in local school systems and postsecondary institutions regardless of which particular projects, activities, and services are funded under the act (U.S. Department of Education, proposed regulations, 1991b, Section 403.191). However, the Department is currently considering allowing the use of sampling or other techniques designed to phase in the evaluation requirement and/or increase the flexibility allowed in local program evaluation.

Local Program Improvement Plan

States are responsible for monitoring Perkins-funded programs to ensure adequate progress toward standards (Section 113). However, the annual evaluation process is locally controlled. Programs which determine that they have failed to make substantial progress toward established standards or identify problems with program access or success for individuals who are members of special populations will be required to develop a local program improvement plan for the following school year. The plan must be developed in consultation with teachers, parents, and students concerned with or affected by the program, and must describe:

- how programs will be modified to improve their effectiveness and
- strategies to improve supplementary services to individuals who are members of special populations (if necessary)(Section 117 (b)).

Joint Program Improvement Plan

Each state is responsible for evaluating the success of local program improvement plans and assisting programs that have not made sufficient progress toward standards one year after the plan's implementation. When this occurs, the state works jointly with the recipient and with teachers, parents, and students to develop a joint plan for program improvement. Joint program improvement plans must contain:

- a description of technical assistance and program activities the State will provide to enhance local program performance,
- a reasonable timetable to improve school performance,
- a description of vocational education strategies designed to improve program performance, and
- a description of strategies to improve supplementary services to individuals who are members of special populations (if necessary) (Section 117 (c)).

The program improvement process mandated by the 1990 Perkins is cyclical. There are no penalties prescribed by the act for programs failing to meet standards even after the implementation of a joint program improvement plan. Rather, the law calls for the annual revision of joint plans until standards are met for one year.

Ensuring Increased Achievement for Special Populations

Encourage Efforts to Serve Special Populations

Once in place, state accountability systems could provide the foundation for the program improvement efforts described in the law. At the local level, quality accountability systems will ensure that programs have objective and credible information on which to base program improvement efforts. In addition, such systems will generate information which government officials, parents, and employers need to determine whether or not a vocational program is meeting their needs. However, their effectiveness in stimulating reform will depend upon the quality of the systems developed and local commitment to program improvement. Program improvement, as described in the law, must focus on increasing access and improving outcomes for individuals from special populations (Section 117 (a), 117 (b)). *Consequently, it is essential that state-established measures and standards of performance are effective in evaluating and encouraging local efforts to serve these groups. Most importantly, state accountability systems must not hurt those individuals whom the Perkins is designed to help.*

States and localities must be aware of the impact which accountability systems have on programs serving large populations of individuals with special needs. Rigidly defined standards may embarrass and discourage programs serving the highest concentrations of students from special populations and encourage them to serve only those students who are likely to meet standards.

Use More than the Minimum Number of Measures

States wishing to facilitate extensive program improvement will need to go beyond mere compliance (Hoachlander, 1991). Director for National Planning and Evaluation at the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, E. Gareth Hoachlander (1991), has warned that limiting the number of measures used may result in accountability systems which focus on too few outcomes and are of little value in efforts to promote widespread program improvement. He argues that useful systems will use between 6 and 12 measures. The U.S. Department of Education has recommended that States use at least six measures (States Starting, 1991). To date, it appears that most states recognize this need and will include at least five measures in their accountability systems (Hoachlander & Rahn, 1992).

While willingness to go beyond mere compliance is necessary, it is not enough. Fair and accurate systems will require thoughtful and careful selection of performance measures and standards. The Center for Law and Education, Inc. (1991) recommends that accountability systems include measures and standards which:

- assess student achievement of basic and advanced academic skills, including problem solving in math, science, reading, writing, and social studies;
- assess program provision of strong experience and understanding of all aspects of the industry;
- examine the full range of relevant program features;
- use objective, reliable, and accurate data; and
- assess student skills with measures that are valid for all populations.

Evaluate Access, Learning, and Labor Market Outcomes

Local progress in increasing program access for individuals who are members of special populations may be monitored through selected measures. However, access measures alone are not sufficient for monitoring the progress of special populations. They must be used in conjunction with learning and labor market measures. *While it is not necessary or desirable to establish separate measures or standards for special populations, it is critical that state systems include measures that identify and encourage achievement gains for all groups.* Performance measures which document the progress of low-achieving students must be included within each state's system. Hoachlander (1991) recommends that states and localities adopt performance measures that reflect student gains over time.

Select Measures that Assess Change Over Time

> Students who enter a program with very low skills may achieve significant gains in skills, even though their skill levels may still fall short of the performance standard required for program completion. And such gains should be identified and progress encouraged. (p. 21)

Select Measures That Allow for Fair Comparisons

In order to encourage local efforts to serve special population students, accountability systems must report and compare performance fairly.

> Comparing raw scores of markedly different students, programs or institutions is not likely to result in an accurate picture of relative performance. An inner city school with high concentrations of academically disadvantaged students is not likely to score as well on a wide variety of performance measures as a school in a middle class suburb. A direct comparison of the performance of these two schools is clearly not appropriate. (Hoachlander, 1991, p. 65)

Supplementary Services are Necessary to Program Improvement

The 1990 Perkin's mission is to "make the United States more competitive in the world economy by developing more fully the academic and occupational skills of all segments of the population" (P.L 101-392, Section 2). This mission cannot be achieved without significant improvements in services to individuals who are members of special populations. The law acknowledges the importance of improving outcomes for these populations and includes numerous provisions designed to accomplish widespread increases in academic and occupational achievement. The program improvement process mandated in the law requires: (1) ongoing assessment of the progress of special populations, (2) identification of strategies to overcome barriers to program access and success for these individuals, and (3) the identification and improvement of strategies to improve supplementary services to individuals who are members of special populations.

The provision of supplementary services is as critical to program improvement as is the development of quality accountability systems. To a great extent, generating significant improvements in populations of individuals with special needs will depend upon the supplementary services called for in the 1990 Perkins Act. However, resistance to the law's mandate to improve the provision of supplementary services may severely compromise its impact on those groups targeted in the law (i.e. individuals with disabilities, those who are disadvantaged either educationally or economically, persons with limited proficiency in English, individuals in correctional institutions, and those participating in programs designed to eliminate sex bias (Section 521 (31)).

The U.S. Department of Education is currently considering changes in the 1990 Perkins' requirements for services to special populations in response to critics who argue that they limit the funds which can be spent on program improvement. *For a significant number of youth in this country, supplementary services are the most necessary program improvement. Without them, they will fail.* States and localities that decide to limit supplementary services in favor of "program improvement" risk substandard outcomes for a substantial number of their students.

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